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Escalations: Theorizing sudden accelerating change

By Lars Højer, Anja Kublitz, Stine Simonsen Puri and Andreas Bandak

Abstract

In this article, we explore what happens in qualitative terms when a social phenomenon accelerates in quantitative terms. We do so by introducing *escalation* as an analytical concept through which to understand sudden processes of accelerating change. Using the Danish cartoon controversy as the ethnographic prism, we show that accelerating dynamics may not only imply the quantitative growth of "things" but also that the qualitative scales underpinning and measuring change are themselves changed in the process of growth. We take *escalation* to refer to this "change of change" within processes of sudden accelerating growth. By introducing a new theoretical concept, we aim to contribute to discussions of social and cultural change in anthropology and elsewhere and to enable and encourage future comparison between different ethnographies of accelerating changes.

Keywords

Escalation, change, acceleration, schismogenesis, imitation, scale, imagination, quantity, globalization, cartoon crisis

In recent times, the world has witnessed a number of accelerating processes that were sparked by decisive events. September 11, 2001 and the dynamics that this attack instigated may appear to epitomize such accelerations, but equally often sudden bursts of social action are provoked by less spectacular, yet critical events: the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor prompted the Arab Spring, a mining company's apparent discovery of gold on Borneo conjured an investment frenzy in North America (Tsing 2000), and the publication of cartoons of the Islamic Prophet in a Danish newspaper triggered an international controversy. These well-known phenomena indicate that just as sudden accelerating processes tend to be unanticipated and unpredictable in terms of outcome, so are their sudden growth and tremendous effects beyond question.[1]

In this article, we explore what happens in qualitative terms when a social phenomenon accelerates in quantitative terms. We do so by introducing *escalation* as a theoretical concept through which to understand sudden accelerating processes characterized by the exponential growth of something (debt, media coverage, dead bodies, etc) and a correspondingly expanding social dynamic. Using the Danish cartoon

[1] For commenting on previous versions of this article, we would like to thank Stine Krøijer, Ghassan Hage, Martin Holbraad, Morten Nielsen, Gisa Weszkalnys, Birgitte Stampe Holst, Nils Bubandt, Frank Sejersen, Steffen Jensen, Frida Hastrup, Bjørn Thomassen, Esther Fihl, Nerina Weiss, Michael Ulfstjerne, Charlotte Olivier, Martin Demant Frederiksen and Simon Turner as well as the editor Julia Eckert and the two anonymous peer reviewers. Also, we would like to extend our gratitude to the Danish Research Council for Independent Research / Humanities for funding the project (DFF—4001-00223) on which this article is based.

controversy as our ethnographic prism, we will show that such a phenomenon may not only imply the growth of "things" (prices, number of demonstrations, number of text messages, etc) and an increased spatial distribution (from local issue to global concern), but also that the qualitative scales underpinning and generating such changes are themselves often changed in the process. We take *escalation* to refer to this "change of change" within processes involving sudden accelerating growth. The overall idea is that an accelerating growth such as the cartoon controversy may not only imply that a process is speeded up and geographically expanding, but also that the growth – and its conditions – may turn into something entirely different in the process. We suggest that the concept of escalation can be used to identify and analyze phenomena of growth that do not only produce more of the same but also produce differences in kind. By introducing a new theoretical concept[2], we hope to contribute to discussions of social and cultural change in anthropology and other fields and to enable and encourage comparison between different kinds of accelerating change.

Before we turn to the elaboration of the concept, however, we will prepare and substantiate the discussion by offering an ethnographic description of the so-called

[2] "Escalation" as a concept was introduced in the beginning of the cold war in political science to refer to the dynamics of nuclear arms race (Hahn, 1965; Brodie, 1966) and popularized in the context of the Vietnam war. Today it is used widely in the media to refer to a variety of rapid growth processes, while it continues to be a concept in use in political science as well as economics (to refer to accelerating prices). "Escalations" has also been used in anthropology to characterize a "self-scaling system" and the "proliferation of a particular political assemblage" (Højer, 2013). While this latter take on escalations has inspired this study, it differs substantially from the conceptualization proposed here.

"cartoon controversy", a worldwide flare-up with enduring, yet open-ended, effects that was provoked by the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper. This example of accelerated growth will be used to discuss selected theories of change in anthropology and to explore the concepts of schismogenesis, mimesis, imagination, and scale with the aim of defining escalation as a theoretical concept that rethinks accelerating growth.

The cartoon controversy

The last week of September 2005 turned out to be a troubled week for Muslim immigrants in Denmark.[3] On Monday, the Danish Minister of Culture launched a "Canon on Culture" against "immigrants from Muslim countries who refuse to recognize Danish culture and European norms" (Mikkelsen, 2005). On Thursday, Muslims were compared to fast-spreading cancer by a member of the Danish parliament for the Danish People's Party (Ritzau, September 29, 2005). Finally, on Friday, the largest newspaper in Denmark, *Jyllands-Posten,* printed twelve cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad (Rose, 2005). The two most (in)famous cartoons depicted the Prophet with a bomb in his turban and the Islamic creed printed on the bomb itself; and the Prophet

[3] The ethnography is based on ongoing fieldwork among Muslims in Denmark since 2005. For an elaborated description and different analysis of the ethnography presented in this article, see Kublitz, 2010, 2011, and 2016. See also Hansen and Hundevadt, 2006; Jerichow and Rode, 2006; Klausen, 2009; Lindekilde et al., 2009; Hervik, 2012; and Grøndahl (accessed May 9, 2017) for overviews of the development of the cartoon controversy. For other analysis of the event see, among many others, Asad, 2009 and Mahmood, 2009.

holding a scimitar, flanked by two women in burqas.

While the cartoons did not initially receive much attention in the ethnic Danish public, the news spread like wildfire among Muslims in Denmark. Nobody, it seemed, had actually read *Jyllands-Posten*, but everybody knew about the cartoons, either through *Al-Jazeera* (that got to know about them through a Danish stringer), the Friday prayer in the local mosques, or chains of text messages. Following a week of intense debate among Danish Muslims, a call for a demonstration was circulated via mosques, flyers, and text messages. The demonstration turned out to be the largest demonstration by Muslims in the history of Denmark. It was covered by *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* and kicked off a growing number of initiatives and counter reactions in Denmark, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and beyond.

Only a few days later, a letter was forwarded to the Danish Prime Minister by eleven ambassadors from Muslim-majority countries. In this letter, they complained about the cartoons in the context of discrimination and an ongoing smear campaign against Islam and Muslims (Jerichow and Rode, 2006: 24). The letter did not only refer to the cartoons, but also to the recent statements by the MP from the Danish Peoples Party and the Minister of Culture. The ambassadors' request for a meeting was declined. Soon after, a number of Muslim organizations in Denmark filed a complaint with the Danish police, claiming that *Jyllands-Posten* had committed a criminal offence in

relation to the law on blasphemy and the law on discrimination.[4] Among Muslims in Denmark the demonstration, the letter by the ambassadors and the official complaint to the Danish police were all considered democratic peaceful means of protesting against discrimination. In the ethnic Danish public, however, the initiatives were interpreted as actions against "the freedom of speech" and democracy. After the Danish Prime Minister publicly refused to recognize any allegations of discrimination, a group of Danish Muslim clerics decided to turn elsewhere for help and send two delegations to the Middle East with a dossier on the cartoon affair (and other unrelated pictures that ridiculed the Prophet and Muslims in general) and a letter that described "racist tendencies" against Muslims in Denmark. The delegations went to Egypt and Lebanon, and, in December 2005, at the next summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the dossier was distributed and became widely known in the Muslim world. This resulted in a common complaint from the 57 member states to the Danish Prime Minister and to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006: 64-65).

From December 2005 to June 2006, a growing number of demonstrations and other protests against the cartoons took place worldwide (Lindekilde et al., 2009: 295). The protests mobilized thousands and thousands of people across the Middle East,

[4] Later in 2006 the Public Prosecutor concluded that the cartoons did not constitute a criminal offence.

Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States, with single demonstrations attracting more than half a million protestors in Lebanon, 100,000 in Morocco, and 50,000 in Pakistan (Grøndahl). The many protests did not only target Jyllands-Posten but also Denmark and a diverse range of institutions (from local PLO to UN offices). In the Danish media, one could regularly witness Muslims from all over the world setting fire to the Danish flag (such as in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Philippines, India, Iraq, and Iran), to dolls and pictures that imitated the Danish Prime Minister (in Pakistan and Gaza) or attacking Danish consulates and embassies (in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Indonesia). In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, shops started importing and selling Danish flags for the purpose of flag-burning. These multiple global protests were further intensified when newspapers in Germany, Spain, and France, among other European countries, chose to reprint the cartoons in response (Larsen and Seidenfaden, 2006: 96–97). More than a hundred people were killed and several hundred wounded during the protests. The growing popular uprisings and international complaints turned the cartoons into a global political and diplomatic crisis that prompted statements on religion, economy, ethics and emotions from prime ministers and presidents around the world, including the Unites States and the Russian Federation, and from the Secretary-Generals of the UN, NATO and the Council of the EU (Grøndahl). The cartoons were also discussed in prominent programs on Al-Arabia, Al-Jazeera, BBC, and CNN (Grøndahl). In April 2006 the cartoon controversy was measured to be the largest single

Danish event ever on the internet (Hansen and Hundevadt, 2006:273). In addition to the many political protests, a consumer boycott of Danish products was initiated and in January 2006 Arla, the largest Danish dairy company, was losing between $0.8 million and $1.6 million daily (Grøndahl). By spring 2006, the controversy was referred to as the biggest Danish national crisis since World War II (Rothstein and Rothstein, 2006: 13; Trads, 2006: 9).

The many protests against the cartoons had subsided by June 2006, yet they never really stopped. The Danish cartoonists were exposed to death threats and a planned, but foiled, murder attempt over the next couple of years, and in February 2008 *Jyllands-Posten* chose to reprint the cartoons as a gesture of solidarity. This unleashed a second round of protests and demonstrations by Muslims in Denmark and abroad. Since then the cartoon controversy has been reinvigorated a number of times when artists around the world have ridiculed the Prophet, the most recent and spectacular cases being from 2015. In January 2015, the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, infamous for (among other things) its many cartoons of the Prophet, including their reprint of Jyllandsposten's cartoons, was attacked by two gunmen who killed 12 people and injured 11 before they escaped. During the ensuing manhunt, another related gunman killed five more victims and took hostages at a kosher supermarket.[5] This event was echoed in Copenhagen in February 2015, when a young Danish Muslim man

[5] See Zagato 2015 for an extensive analysis of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*.

opened fire at a cultural center where Swedish artist Lars Vilks, known for his cartoons of the Prophet, was speaking. One man was killed. The same night, the gunman also killed a Jewish security guard in front of Copenhagen's main synagogue. Finally, in May 2015, two gunmen opened fire at an art exhibition in Texas where caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad were on display. All these events reinvigorated the cartoons by *Jyllands-Posten* that were now discussed in the context of Islamic State and home-grown jihadists.

Studying change: revolutions and conflicts

The question we pose in this article is how to understand sudden accelerating processes of this kind. We suggest that existing theoretical frameworks can help us understand the outburst of conflicts and, in part, the accelerating growth. However, they fail to understand the non-causal development and the unpredictable outcomes of accelerating phenomena such as the cartoon controversy, and hence fall short of identifying what we have termed the "change of change" itself. To demonstrate this, we will briefly relate the cartoon controversy to existing theories of change within anthropological theory more generally.

One may convincingly argue that antropology, from the outset, was reluctant to deal with change (Robbins, 2007). While the discipline was deeply occupied with questions of social and cultural change in the nineteenth century, most

unilinear evolutionary studies assumed the existence of evolutionary stages and thus reduced evolution—or change—to "something that only happened between stages" (Friedman, 1975:161). They often left change to "inventions and discoveries" (Morgan, 1985 [1877]), i.e. the sudden transformations (e.g. "the invention of pottery") that "gave a new and powerful impulse forward" (Morgan, 1985 [1877]:40) and took place when jumping from one developmental stage to the next. In principle, dramatic change happened at a point in time with no extension, and this point merely served to break away from one stable period (for example, savagery) and move into the next equally stable period (barbarism). Evolution was not "inherent in the social forms themselves" (Friedman, 1975:161). Succeeding the evolutionist paradigm, the functionalist and culturalist approaches of modern anthropology's formative years in the first half of the twentieth century left the discipline open to accusations of neglecting change altogether, or at least of reducing questions of change to "acculturation" or more or less accidental "diffusion." The opposition between diachronic and synchronic perspectives, and the reproduction of this division within the theoretical paradigms themselves (Ferguson, 1997), meant that change itself was a black box in much of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropology. There are, of course, some notable exceptions to these patterns of neglecting "change in itself," and here we want to highlight the writings of Karl Marx on revolution, Max Gluckman on situational analysis, and Gregory Bateson on schismogenesis, because these authors, each in their own way, explore questions that

we believe are pertinent for grasping the discussions that the above-mentioned accelerating processes give rise to.

Marx's major contribution to discussions on social and cultural change was that he, in his specific evolutionary scheme, pointed out that stages such as capitalism were not stable (Marx, 1974 [1859]). They were fraught with potential conflict and, as such, involved the germ of their own destruction. Whereas instability constituted systems and was present at any time, change nevertheless materialized in revolutionary "spurts"; i.e. in an acceleration of potential conflicts. Marx's theoretical scheme raises a number of questions, such as whether revolutions and accelerating dynamics, such as the cartoon controversy, are the outcome of tensions built up over a long period and whether they follow a preordained historical process. Does change really happen before it happens? Marx's answer would seem to be a resounding "yes" and, in line with this, he pointed out that there was a difference between real infra-structural conflicts that would eventually lead to revolutions (or accelerations) and people's perception of such inherent contradictions in the system. Ideology was a system by which the world was hidden (Bloch, 1989:18), yet reality would nevertheless assert itself eventually and do away with false perceptions in the unavoidable progression of history. In Marx's case then, a slow build-up was taking place in an underlying reality that could not initially be perceived by ordinary human beings but nevertheless would abruptly and suddenly manifest itself in a revolution. A revolution

was thus the necessity of the invisible becoming visible when tensions outgrew the system. Whether one accepts the socio-material tenets underlying the Marxist frame or not, it does provide us with a fully-fledged theory of revolutions, and accelerating dynamics, as predictable and linear movements that follow the quantifiable rhythm of "the straw that breaks the camel's back". Explaining the cartoon controversy through this logic would entail that the protestors simply felt increasingly subjugated and "had enough". The cartoons were the last straw. They were the end point of a "troubled week", itself the end point of a long troubled process of suppression.

Inspired by Marx, among others, Gluckman and the Manchester School were also preoccupied with such moments of crises and (accelerating) change. Based on the assumption that human social existence is one of continual flux, they wanted to reveal the historical forces and social processes that generate such flux (Kapferer, 2006: 120). As they explored this, situational and extended case analysis became the trademark of the Manchester School (Gluckman, 1958 [1940]). Simultaneously a theory of praxis and a method, the principle was that one could study social processes as they unfold through detailed ethnographic studies of critical events or situations of crisis. These "trouble-cases" were to be understood as neither exceptional nor typical, but as particular fertile entry points for the study of emergent social processes (Kapferer, 2010: 3). Gluckman's studies of political conflict in South Africa led him to distinguish between rebellions and revolutions. Whereas rebellions reproduced existing political

structures by simply replacing personnel in key political positions, revolutions altered the political economy and had the potential for radical transformations (*ibid*; Gluckman, 1963). In other words, Gluckman, when looking at drastic change, distinguished between changes that made a change and changes that did not, and thereby opened up a discussion of the genuineness of change. In relation to our case, this would beg the question whether the cartoon controversy was simply more of the same—a crystallization and constant replay of existing tensions—or whether it was a change of deep-seated structures. Did it transform the fundamental order of things once and for all?[6]

Marx and Gluckman are obvious predecessors in any study of drastic change, and they make a number of important claims. First, they both identify conflict or tension as the motor behind drastic change. Second, they emphasize the importance of potentiality and energy; i.e. of a build-up that precedes drastic change and needs to be released. Third, at least Marx tends to see the system as predictable and change as linear. While some of these thoughts inspire a possible reading of parts of our ethnography, our case study also allows us to question a number of Marx's and Gluckman's assumptions. Are accelerations always triggered by objective, quantifiable, and preexisting tension? Is their trajectory predictable? Do they follow a linear causal development? And not least, does the mutual exclusion of stasis and change, rebellion and revolution, apply to

[6] See Kublitz (2010) for a situational analysis of the cartoon controversy.

accelerating dynamics such as the cartoon controversy? We will attend to these questions in due course, but more importantly for now is to notice that both Marx and Gluckman seem to focus on understanding the cause, the *why*, that leads to change, rather than the mechanism, the *how*, that leads the "revolution" as such to grow. To unpack this *how*, we will start by looking into the mechanism of growth as dealt with by Gregory Bateson.

Growth and imitation

Bateson's main contribution to the study of change is the concept of schismogenesis (Bateson, 1935, 1958 [1936], 2000 [1949]). Schismogenesis, in Bateson's understanding, is a cumulative interaction between individuals that leads to increasing differentiation in the norms and behavior of those individuals (Bateson, 1958 [1936]: 175). While this notion is not unlike Marx's notion of class struggle—and Bateson does mention the affinity himself (1935: 182)—it is based not on a study of capitalist society but on the Iatmul in Papua New Guinea. System logics, game theory and psychology, rather than class struggles and political economy, are Bateson's main concern. He developed his theory in the 1930s, during the inter-war period, when there were numerous attempts to theorize and predict what was seen as irrational war behavior.

According to Bateson, the process of schismogenesis is driven by a vicious cycle, or positive feedback mechanism, whereby role differences are built up

and strengthened, leading to further, accelerating differentiation. In "complementary schismogenesis," the interaction between leader and follower, for example, increasingly enhances the difference between these very same roles. And in "symmetrical schismogenesis," the relation between similar, yet opposing roles such as aggressor versus aggressor, strengthen the roles and their opposition. Bateson draws our attention to accelerating feedback processes that often result in a climax and, possibly, the relief of tension. He thus captures the process of "reactions to reactions" or of "like producing like" in accelerating change.

Bateson is important for our exploration of accelerations because he proposes a model for the mechanism of accelerating growth and sees this growth as a force or a system in and of itself, not unlike the "urge to grow" of Canetti's crowds (Canetti 1962:16). Whether financial crisis, Arab Spring, or cartoon controversies, accelerations feed on themselves and absorb an ever-increasing amount of human energy, affect, and imaginative work. They involve schismogenesis in the sense that "more feeds more" (whether of the same or the opposite).[7] The cartoons of the Islamic Prophet led to more media coverage that led to more actions, which, in turn, led to more media coverage. It also resulted in continuing attacks on dominant Danish symbols,

[7] This parallels systems theory as represented by Niklas Luhmann. In Luhmann's work, risk and trust are part of a system, which under normal conditions is upheld by generalized predictability and "auto-poesis"—a self-referential system which is characterized by feeding itself in a balanced manner (Luhmann 1990, 1995 [1984]). Such a normal condition, however, can be destabilized when accelerating feedback temporarily jam the system.

such as the Danish flag, as well as the printing of other satirical drawings that further divided enemy and foe as in symmetrical schismogenesis. Likewise, in derivative markets, a rise in price due to demand, can lead to price accelerations because demand for the same product increases, what in behavioral economics have been labeled "herd behavior" (Smith, 1981; Lux, 1995; Dasgupta, Prat, and Verdao, 2011).[8] Thus, while someone usually leads revolutions (Thomassen, 2012:684), accelerations, in line with Bateson, point to self-generating processes, which also involve mass mobilization. In accelerations, the driver is also the journey.

Implicit in Bateson's theory—and possibly any theory of accelerations—is the concept of mimesis; i.e. the fact that more tends to produce more of the same (or of its opposite). Imitation is intrinsic to the Arab Spring (where a revolution in Tunisia led to a revolution in Egypt), to derivative market crashes (that are often explained with reference to panicking and mimicking "crowd behavior"), and to mass psychogenic illness (where symptoms spread among patients without any external cause for the illness, apart from the actual imitation itself), and it is certainly part and parcel of a cartoon controversy that led to ever more cartoons and an increasing number of burned Danish flags. According to Gabriel Tarde, who has recently enjoyed a revival within anthropology (Candea 2010) and cognate disciplines (see, for example, Latour 2002), the desire to be imitated is key to any social production (Tarde, [1895] 2012). When

[8] For examples of how these dynamics have been described in sociology and anthropology, see Zaloom (2006) and Borch (2007).

discussing Tarde, Latour asks us to take up this idea of imitation; i.e. to follow the "imitative rays" "in and of themselves" and to study "the epidemiology of beliefs" (Latour, 2010: 68-70).[9] This is a sound suggestion, and one that goes very well with theorizing accelerations. The Tunisian revolution turned into the Arab Spring when it inspired revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and the printing of the cartoons of the Prophet in Denmark led to an excess of similar cartoons all around the world. Similarly, the Copenhagen shooting in February 2015 clearly imitated the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Jewish community in Paris in January 2015, an event that in itself was inseparable from the initial drawings. Thus, studying accelerations seems to imply a study of the "imitative rays" of mimicking behavior.

It is also clear that, apart from straightforward imitation (doing something similar), the process of imitation also involves counter-imitation (doing the opposite) (Tarde, 1903 [1895]: xvii). The Arab Spring inspired anti-revolutionary responses, and the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015 led to immediate retaliation against Islamic State (IS). Much in line with Taussig (1987)—and, indeed, schismogenesis—what was taking place was a mimicry of fantasized (and maybe not so fantasized) others (Aretxaga, 2000). Other similar versions of counter-imitation and complementary schismogenesis may be found in the multi-ethnic suburbs of Paris and Copenhagen, where the desperation and lack of hope and agency felt by some is mirrored in

[9] For a cognitive anthropological discussion of similar issues, see Sperber (1986).

radicalized actions with "too much" agency, such as the violent suicidal missions against *Charlie Hebdo* and the cartoonist in Copenhagen or in riots expressing "pure antagonism" with "no negotiable vindication to express" (Bertelsen and Zagato, 2015). Here, the inability to anticipate a future is counter-imitated in radical agency that aims for a radically different future.

However, in stressing the epidemic spread of imitations and counter-imitations and in highlighting positive feedback mechanisms where change is, so to speak, caused by itself, the difference between an ordinary social life of imitation and the rapid multiplication of imitations in the accelarating sense is still left unexplored. Why are certain imitations copied more than others? And how is this accelerating growth instigated? These are questions that focus on what drives and blocks these processes of change. Bateson does identify various restraints to schismogenetic processes; for example, the Balinese and their cultural ethos of stability. He also identifies different schismogenetic processes working in opposed directions and environmental factors, such as lack of energy (Bateson 1935, 2000 [1949]). Yet he is surprisingly quiet when it comes to exploring the (initial) momentum of such processes.

Difference and imagination

At this point, we will briefly return to Marx and Gluckman, who as mentioned did have some answers to the question of why things accelerate. They suggested that social,

political, and/or economic contrasts were the drivers behind mobilizations and—we can now add—the sudden spread of imitations. Imitations proliferate, they explain, because they speak to latent and/or increasing conflicts in a quantifiable socio-economic reality.

While we do not want to dismiss this insight on the driving force of accelerations, we believe that introducing the concept of escalation—which points to the change of change—complicates this causality, where a fixed qualitative scale (class) measures an objective contrast (class difference). Initially, it does so in at least two ways. First, the notion of cause and effect, and not least linearity, is too simple in such a scheme. Objective "class" differences, for example, might of course exist as measurable and quantifiable realities, at least if using particular socio-economic scales, and the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings may indeed "constitute an intensification of current processes" (Bertelsen and Zagato, 2015:3) of, let us say, ethnic marginalization as in the case of the reactions to the Danish cartoons. Yet such "differences" and "current processes" can also remain potentials that never lead to drastic change. Moreover, often the so-called "effect"—an event or a revolution—may be said to mobilize the "cause"; that is, to generate the reality (the class—or in the case of the cartoons, ethnic—difference) that was supposed to give rise to the effect in the first place. After all, Marx, as has often been claimed, may be said not just to have *discovered* class; he may also have invented it and made it a (conceptual) force in history. When interviewed by Kublitz, a so-called Danish jihadist who had fought in Egypt and Syria made a similar observation when he

commented on the sudden fall of Mubarak and Gaddafi and the ensuing rise of social and political movements. “Nobody had expected that. Nobody had imagined that,” he emphasized, and then concluded that “I found out that you should not be delimited by what is realistic.” This is not to dismiss pre-existing realities and tensions (maybe the informant is wrong and reality clouded by his false beliefs), but rather to show how the cause and effect linearity in accelerations are more complicated than proposed by Marx and others and that events might exceed existing realities and conjure up realities as much as they reflect them (Kapferer 2010:15).

The quote furthermore draws attention to the imagination of radical differences as the driver of escalations. Just as the Arab Spring may have been moved by the sudden imagined possibility of entirely different political regimes, a financial escalation can be motivated by unexpected news—the apparent discovery of gold on Borneo for example (Tsing 2000) —that leads to an imagined massive difference between the current value of an asset and its perceived future value, and a rift between new enemies can gain momentum when an event manages to stage and crystallize this difference. While the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City, a symbol of capitalism and the Western world, created a political platform on which Western nations could unite and initiate the “war on terrorism”, the insults of the Prophet, the main symbol of Islam, created possibilities for Muslim communities to counter Western hegemonies. The cartoon controversy became globally known not

only because it insulted a pre-existing global Muslim community, but because it created a platform that any Muslim group could enter to counter local Arab regimes and Western hegemonies (Kublitz, 2010).[10] This also explains why the twelve cartoons attracted widespread attention. Defacing a dominant "symbol", the Prophet, in the act of depiction made the cartoons a powerful generator – or accelerator – of differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, and a surplus of negative energy arose that started a circuit of defacements, where "the defacing act seems to demand a mimetic counter-reaction" (Taussig, 1999: 30, see also Kublitz, 2011). Following on from Bateson, Tarde, Latour, and Taussig, the cartoon controversy can thus be described as an epidemiology of imagined radical difference, where Muslims all over the world protested against the defacement of the Prophet by defacing all the national Danish dominant symbols within reach, such as Danish embassies, Danish flags, and dolls of the Danish Prime Minister—acts which unleashed further acts of defacement of the Prophet when other newspapers chose to reprint the cartoons in response. So, to follow up on the questions raised as to why some processes of imitation accelerate

[10] For instance, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Hamas won the parliamentary elections on January 25, 2006. In the following week, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades (associated with the secular nationalist party Fatah), Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, all organized demonstrations against the cartoons. These protests did not just target *Jyllands-Posten* or Denmark, but also served to promote the organizations themselves in the ongoing power struggle between secular and Islamic movements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. What had begun as a replay of some common discussions on Islam in a Danish context had suddenly grown to fuel an increasing number of different local conflicts and created a global platform that Muslims all over the world could use to counter local regimes and the Western colonial project (cf. Rio, 2015).

and others do not, we suggest that we need to pay attention to the generative role of imaginations of radical difference. In accelerating dynamics people—and prices and bombs—are not just moved by "what already is" but just as much by powerful imaginaries of "what might become" (in this case a future "Islamic" or "Western" threat) and "what might have been" (Whyte, 1997; Kublitz, 2011; Weszkalnys, 2014; Bandak, 2015; Bear, Birla, and Puri, 2015; Puri, 2015; Tsing, 2006). Escalations, we argue, involve such particular intense moments of imagination that contract past, present and future (Bergson, 1930; Deleuze, 1988 [1966]; Deleuze and Guattari, 2004 [1980]) in ways that disrupt linear temporality and causal understandings of change. Accelerations are thus tied to the intensity through which imaginations are nourished, and they – as we will now show – can easily lead to *escalating* dynamics, where differences also become *new* differences, and where one step up the ladder (to use the metaphor originally applied by Hahn (1966)) changes the very nature of the ladder (or escalator) that one is climbing.

Scale and scaling

If scales change as dynamics accelerate one may reasonably argue that—apart from drawing ethnographic attention to schismogenesis, imitation, complicated causalities, and intense imaginations of difference—the most important discussion that the concept of escalation gives rise to is the relationship between quantitative growth and qualitative

change. How does “many” or “much” relate to a change in kind? This relationship between quantitative growth and qualitative difference, we suggest, can be explored through the concept of scale. While scale is intrinsic to the concept of e-scalation itself, dynamics of scale are also part and parcel of the sudden acceleration processes that we refer to.

First, scales are at stake in the obvious sense that the cartoon controversy, the Arab Spring, and the financial crisis all involve movements that expand in space. In much literature on human geography, globalization, and migration (e.g. Schiller, Basch and Blanc, 1992; Marston et al., 2005; Lebel et al., 2005), scale is primarily theorized in this sense, as a matter of size and extension in space, as a way of quantitatively measuring the “local” and the “global” or “trans-national.” The accelerating processes that we have attended to in this article are thus considered “large-scale” phenomena because they move from local to global and cover or connect ever-larger territories. Technological mediators—nowadays including internet-based platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter—clearly play a crucial role in drawing a large number of people from different places into such expanding and accelerating circuits and in allowing imitations to accelerate, a fact that Tarde and Latour would be the first to admit. The cartoon controversy was an extension in space—from local to global, if you wish—and it involved a number of important media (television, newspapers, cell phones, mosques, travelers, etc). The importance of scale as an extension in space is

thus hard to ignore when it comes to accelerating dynamics, and so is the fact that information technology, especially internet-based, is a critical infrastructural component in the spread of images and actions in a world where everyday life has become "mediatized" (Tomlinson, 2008; cf. Appadurai, 1996).

Yet, apart from raising questions about quantitative spatial extensions or "globalization," the notion of escalations, we believe, also highlights the importance of scale in a qualitative sense. Accelerations do not only imply that something grows rapidly but also that this something is defined in qualitative terms. What grows can be the "length" and "pace" of movements through space (as in "globalization"), but it may equally well be dead bodies, prices, numbers of migrants, water levels, GDPs, or, indeed, the "magnitude" of defacements. Thus, if scale as a quantitative spatial extension is a feature of accelerations, so is scale as a quality, simply because one needs qualitatively defined procedures for measuring an acceleration. This brings us to a different strand of literature, where scale has been introduced to denote "cultural artifacts" that offer different possibilities for measurement and imagination (Strathern, 1990, 2000; Wastell 2001; see also Tsing 2000[11]). A cultural scale of "groups and numbers", for instance, can be used to measure the difference between groups of minority and majority, and so can a cultural scale of "enlightenment" be used to range

[11] While Tsing suggests paying attention to "the making of scale" in the context of accelerating investments in mining, she – unlike us – tends to see scale in spatial terms, i.e. as "the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view" (Tsing 2000:120).

different groups of people according to levels of "development". In this perspective, the local-global paradigm is just one prism for imagining difference, and accelerating processes are not simply about spatial extension, but also raise questions about how qualitative scales are intrinsic to any measure of quantitative growth.

If existing qualitative scales are a precondition for measuring and identifying any acceleration, measuring the acceleration also becomes part of the acceleration itself. The media uses measures of "newsworthiness" and the media coverage of more and more demonstrations was essential to the acceleration of the cartoon controversy, and so possibly was the fact that it was named (and hence rated as) an "escalation."[12] Yet, even more important to our discussion of escalations is the observation that while a qualitative scale, as a frame that measures differences, is a precondition for (and may even instigate) an acceleration, accelerating quantitative growth can, in turn, also give rise to new scales. This, we believe, has not always been the focus of previous takes on accelerating social dynamics. Tambiah, in his study of riots and the growth of ethno-nationalist conflicts, for example, writes that "transvaluation" assimilates particular incidents "to a larger collective, more enduring,

[12] The naming of something as an escalation (or "a crisis"), both by journalists and academics is in itself "an observation that produces meaning" and consequences (Roitman, 2014: 41). Likewise, "escalation," "crisis" or "event" can, of course, enable certain political acts by being named so (cf. Jarvis, 2008) and labeling, hence, is intrinsic to the escalation itself. Yet, while the kind of accelerating processes attended to here certainly involve language (including the language of escalations), they are more than mere discourse and also include material infrastructures and the concrete imitative acts of a growing number of interconnected people.

and therefore less context-bound, cause or interest [national or ethnic]" (1995: 192). He thus—much in line with the logic of Evans-Pritchard's segmentary lineages (1940)—proposes a given scale of a local context-bound level versus national and global levels for measuring affinities. When things accelerate to higher levels, according to Tambiah, appeals are made to larger and less context-bound but still *pre-existing* loyalties and "global binary" divides such as Muslims versus Hindus (Tambiah, 1996: 259). If for Tambiah, then, "microevents at the local level," such as the publication of the cartoons, "through chainlike linkages, accelerate and *cumulatively build up* into an avalanche, whose episodes *progressively* lose their local contextual, circumstantial, and substantive associations" (Tambiah, 1996: 257, our emphasis), we propose a less cumulative and less linear understanding and suggest that the progression along one single scale cannot be taken for granted and that scale-transformation itself sometimes is part of the accelerating process. This needs further substantiation.

We have already seen how the cartoon controversy led to an ever-increasing number of Muslim protests, dead bodies, burned flags, and news reports, and also contained the emotional momentum (whether during protests or at Danish dinner tables) and radical differences (for or against, minority versus majority) necessary to drive any acceleration forward. However, apart from the agitation, momentum, and differences that drive this acceleration forward, the changes of scale are noticeable. Initially, the acceleration itself took off because the cartoons rescaled things. In

defacing the main symbol of Islam, the cartoons managed to locally unite Muslims in Denmark across class, ethnic, congregational, and generational affiliation and to consolidate and reinterpret a (now dominant) division between Muslims and non-Muslims. If in 2005 the most widely read article on the homepage of one of the biggest Danish Muslim congregations addressed the lack of unity and cooperation among Muslims in Denmark (Det Islamiske Trossamfund i Danmark, 2005), then the cartoon controversy led to the establishment of a common political platform for the Danish Muslim congregations from which to organize demonstrations, law suits, and global advocacy. Yet, as things accelerated, it did more than that. Initially, Danish immigrants responded to the cartoons primarily as an issue of discrimination (as the latest act in a long series of discriminating actions) evoking a national numerical scale of differences between a majority and a minority through a local demonstration, a law suit, and a meeting with representatives of the involved nations of local minorities. When the Danish government, however, did not accept any allegations of discrimination and insisted on measuring the event according to an enlightenment scale of more or less "developed" groups of people (ranging from backward Islamic religious people to progressive liberal secular people), the conflict not only grew in size (from a national conflict between the minority and the majority to a global conflict between Muslims and the West) but also irreversibly became a different kind of conflict. Instead of targeting immigrants in Denmark in terms of how the government could restrict their numbers

(through laws on family reunion and asylum) or "integrate" them (through courses in Danish language, Danish culture, bike riding etc.), immigrants were now mainly handled as Muslims with Medieval mindsets in need of enlightenment (Kublitz, 2010). The growing cartoon controversy, in other words, changed the scale and conjured up new kinds of subjects that, eventually, also led to novel practices and new legislation. Women wearing scarfs in the Danish public were now harassed and intense public debates on scarfs, halal meat and Muslim schools came to take center stage. Increased surveillance of mosques and Muslim private school were introduced and in 2009, after years of intense debate, a "scarf law" was adopted that made it illegal for judges in Danish courts to wear religious symbols. Finally, the cartoon controversy changed character once more with the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, itself a sequel to the cartoon controversy, and the ensuing Copenhagen attack a month later. The Copenhagen attack both mimicked the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*—by targeting Jews and a cartoonist known for ridiculing the Prophet—and re-actualized the original cartoon controversy and thereby managed to rescale the Danish cartoons as a matter of differences between democracy and terrorism. Again, this change of qualitative scale did not only involve new measurements of a growing number of potential terrorists but also irreversibly changed developments. After Charlie Hebdoe and the Copenhagen Shooting, the Danish government adopted a so-called "anti-terrorism package" of approximately 150 million USD that implied radical changes in legislation and security measures in Denmark, and

Danish immigrants were now (and still is) primarily targeted as objects of policies and legislation concerning national security.

While one may reasonably argue that the measurement of immigrants as Muslims or terrorists existed before the cartoon controversy, our main argument is that the growing cartoon controversy, including its powerful ramifications, also generated tipping points of no return, and hence that it cannot simply be understood as more of the same. What emerged, in other words, were not different framings or representations of the same reality but scales that conjured altogether new realities. The many reprints of cartoons of the Prophet all over the world and the violent responses—and the responses to the responses—rescaled the very controversy itself and changed the Danish state's relation to its minorities by reconfiguring it as a relation of security measured on a scale of "more or less 'radical'".[13] The controversy brought about an anti-democratic political subject known as Muslims and made it increasingly difficult—if not impossible—to perceive Danish immigrants only as a minority with a different culture. The continuous changes of qualitative scales and their reciprocal relation to the accelerating quantitative growth of media coverage, mass mobilizations, and legislation not only conjured up

[13] This scale might be best illustrated by the figure of a one way linear arrow in green, yellow and red that the Danish Ministry of Defence, police and intelligence service use to measure and target citizens (mostly Muslims) according to levels of "radicalization" (see e.g. the website of the Municipality of Aarhus: https://www.aarhus.dk/sitecore/content/Subsites/Antiradikaliseringsindsats/Home/Om-radikalisering.aspx?sc_lang=da, accessed September 20, 2017).

new political subjects but also basically changed the existing political order (see also Kublitz, 2016).

We take escalation to refer to this change of scale (and hence, change of acceleration) in accelerating processes. While some dynamics of accelerating growth may indeed only produce more of the same (as is evidently also the case during the cartoon controversy), others—i.e. escalations—also involve changes in kind. Scale as "cultural artifact" thus makes it relevant to ask both how "cultural" scales themselves create rising numbers and how accelerating processes and their emerging imaginations may "incite desire" and "call up", for example, new "publics" or collectivities (Spyer and Steedly, 2013) as numbers rise. The concept of escalation points to such tipping points, when the quantitative notion of "many," suddenly turns into a qualitative notion of new kinds of differences while also highlighting the non-causal progression that makes the outcome of escalating accelerations unpredictable.Who could have imagined that a selection of cartoons in a Danish newspaper would set the world on fire—with riots all over the globe that not only targeted a specific Danish newspaper or Denmark but also local and international people in power? Who—or, for that matter, which algorithm—would have predicted that the publication of cartoons in Denmark would lead to killings in Pakistan? Who could have anticipated that the drawings would still reverberate ten years later and lead to further killings, suddenly fuelling the assassination of the cartoonists from *Charlie Hebdo*? If we consider these incidents part

of the same (re-ignited) dynamic (in the sense that the Cartoon Controversy was a prerequisite for the Charlie Hebdo attack and not its cause), it seems that the lack of any coherent causality stems from changes in the very nature of change itself, much like when Tarde states that he would like, when reading history, "to see in it the unexpected constantly springing forth from regular causality" (Tarde, 1892: 19, cited in Candea, 2010: 4; cf. Bergson, 1946). The causality implied by Marx's build-up is here substituted by the possible activation of potentials and affects (Ruddick, 2010; Massumi, 2015) in the sense that while the cartoons may "move us" (or at least some of us) when they "move around," this movement also highlights the "instability of images as they circulate" (Spyer and Steedly, 2013: 7–8). In a similar vein, accelerations-turned-escalations energize bodies and the release of potentialities rather than determine the exact direction of a movement.[14] They change, and the nature and quality of escalations change, while they are growing.

This change of change complicates the notion of feedback mechanisms.[15] Bateson, as mentioned, wrote about restraining and controlling factors of

[14] Humphrey, in her study of pogroms in Odessa, makes a similar suggestion in relation to the study of crowds as "changing topologies over the time of their existence" (Humphrey, 2012:21).

[15] It also complicates the feedback mechanism central to the ideas behind "escalation of commitment." This is a term first coined by behavorial economist Barry Staw (1976) to describe patterns behind "irrational" economic decision-making, and since it has been applied to a wide range of phenomena from growing climate changes (Arbuthnott and Dolter, 2013) to individual morality (Shaumberg, 2014). The escalations that are described within this framework are examined in controlled decision-making experiments and are measured along a single scale, and do among other things not capture the change of scales.

schismogenesis (Bateson, 1935, 1958 [1936], 2000 [1949]) and thus implicitly distinguishes between "internal" schismogenesis and "external" hindrances. Yet this leaves us with the problem that accelerations are, if anything, characterized by a dynamic which draws many things—affects, imaginations, logics, material structures, etc.—into its circuit and thereby implies a lack of distinction between inside and outside (and with it a lack of distinction between stasis and change, rebellion and revolution). The cartoons, for example, became a way of talking about suppression, religion, trade relations, global geographies, and cultural values. While accelerations thus involve forces that draw in "things" (that previously were outside), it is also these very same things that energize the unpredictable momentum that might "throw" out (new) things and scales. Escalations may thus be equaled with the motions of a tornado, which centripetally engage different matters and centrifugally produce newness and, we may add, "waste" in the form of ruins or destitute, shocked, and motionless lives (cf. Friedman, 2007; Kublitz, 2015), while moving around in (relatively) unpredictable directions.

Now, it is certainly true that economic accelerations and decelerations, booms and busts, are repetitive features of capitalism, just as accelerations may simply lead to more of the same (one authoritarian regime leading to the next after a revolution or a war). In a similar way, the event of *Charlie Hebdo* can be considered "a continuing

reappearance of the systemic conflicts built into French colonialist relationships" (Rio, 2015:15), and even the cartoon controversy actualized some well-known discussions about Islam and its relation to the Western world that exist independently of the accelerations themselves. Accelerating processes can, in other words, gain power from carving out exemplars of conceptual distinctions that people already know and take for granted, thereby confirming people's anticipations. While we do not wish to downplay such repetitive structures, our aim in this article has been to draw attention not only to the irreducible momentum-in-itself of accelerations, but also to the possibility for momentous growths to reconfigure things.

Conclusion

Studies of modernity and the contemporary world—along with capitalism, globalization and, most recently, neoliberalism—have been concerned with defining the features of an epoch. Accelerating movement and a constant increase in the pace of change are seen as characteristics of the modern era (Rosa, 2013; see also Virillo, 1977; Harvey, 1990; Koselleck, 2004), even to the extent that "the exponential growth curve has become the key symbol of our overheated times" (Eriksen and Schober, 2016). Likewise, some have identified the sense of an accelerating "free fall" with an impending catastrophic outcome as characteristic of the current zeitgeist (Bertelsen and Zagato, 2015:1–2). While our aim in this article has certainly been to point to processes that have gained

increasing prominence with the growing scope and pace of information spread, we have tried less to capture a zeitgeist than to rethink change through a particular kind of sudden acceleration where the terms of change itself changes. As part of this, our ambition has also been to gather a range of "miscellaneous facts" (Mauss, 1973[1934]) —sudden accelerating changes—which may potentially be compared. Only time will show whether such comparisons turn out to be productive across the different thematic domains of, for example, politics (conflict escalations), economy (accelerating prices and debt), and religion (sudden conversions, accelerating witchcraft accusations).

Our discussion of accelerating processes has led us from schismogenesis, imitation, and imagination to questions of causality and scale. If we accept that the epidemic spread of imitations and positive feedback mechanisms are key to understanding accelerations, then we are invited to ask questions about how imitation happens, how momenta are ignited and gain force, and what it takes for them to persist. Inspired by Marx, Gluckman, and a number of other recent scholars, we emphasized the importance of intense imaginations and radical difference as drivers of accelerations. We explored how such intense differences were invented, reconfigured or repeated in and through sudden events, which had us raise new defining questions. Do actual systemic differences, for example, lead to accelerations, or do events, and subsequently accelerations, bring out potential differences in existing matter? This again directed our attention towards the question of causality and the concept of escalation.

Stressing the ways in which change might itself change, the concept of escalation poses critical questions about scale and the relationships between quantity and quality and between numbers and imaginations. It does so by taking numbers seriously—something accelerates!—while at the same time recognizing that any acceleration is "culturally measured"; that is, needs to be culturally and politically acknowledged, and not least by recognizing that an increase in quantity may lead to new qualitative scales and imaginaries. The relevant question then becomes not only what is growing, but also which qualitative changes are brought about by quantitative growth and which changes and quantitative accelerations are produced, and hence also accelerated, by qualitative measures.

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